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[a]way station

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1999, 6-9 P.M.

[a]way station has been made possible by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, with additional support from California College of Arts and Crafts, Reichold Chemicals, and the University of Florida.



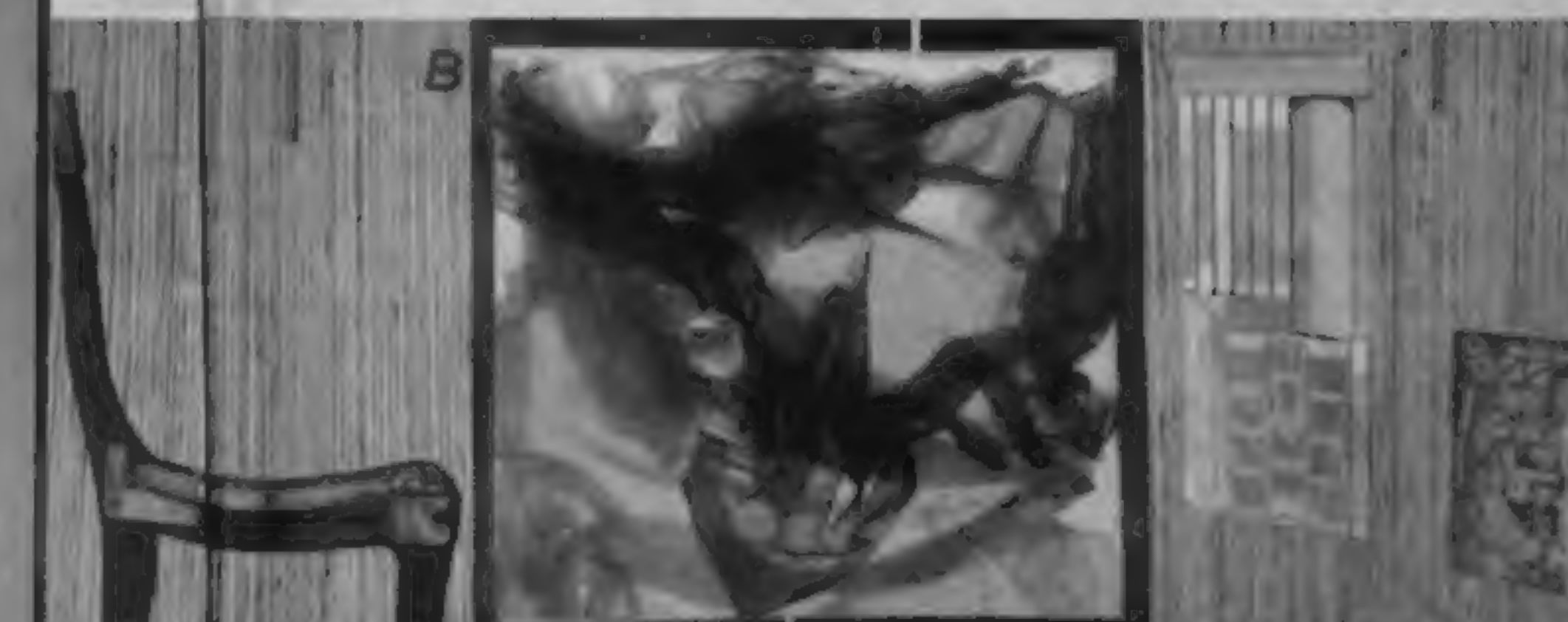
(a) silk dress, a television, a spatula, a dresser. In (a)way station, architects Paul Kanouk and Mabel Q. Wilson present these and other domestic possessions cast in resin, like insects trapped in amber. Framed within freestanding plywood structures, these household items together constitute the interim domestic space of migrants and refugees—men, women and children who, due to political, economic or natural disaster, find themselves in transition, caught between nations, cultures and dwellings. While (a)way station's wooden panels include culturally specific artifacts that reference particular groups of refugees (Chinese lichee nuts, a reed mat, a Bangladeshi newspaper), Kanouk and Wilson have elected not to document or reconstruct actual migrant homes. Nor do they focus on their own family histories. (Kanouk's family was exiled from White Russia in 1917, while Wilson's family moved from North Carolina during the 1950's.) Collapsing the experience of migrants and immigrants into one striking architectural framework, they have instead chosen to represent the space of dislocation as a general condition of domestic in-betweenness.

Exploiting the conventions of both architectural representation and gallery installation, Kanouk and Wilson overcome the icy detachment of the "white cube" as well as the journalistic distance imposed by more orthodox exhibitions dedicated to examining the plight of "others." Stimulating all of our senses, their multimedia installation invites visual, physical and aural involvement. Viewers engage a series of temporary structures equipped not only with familiar household items ranging from the generic (a refrigerator and deodorant) to the sentimental (family photographs) but also with operable drawers and sliding panels containing silk-screened drawings on plexiglass. Spoken narratives resonate through the installation's densely packed yet ephemeral walls. Our direct sensual engagement, coupled with our own first-hand experience of accumulating domestic artifacts, enable us to inhabit physically and to identify psychically with the tumultuous domestic world of migration.

Composed of modular structures that activate and transform the space, and ultimately, the perceptions of viewers, (a)way station, borrowing a term coined by Michael Fried to describe Minimal Art, can be characterized as "theatrical." However, the installation is "theatrical" in a more literal sense as well: its demountable walls, that facilitate travel to future venues, suggest a stage set belonging to an itinerant theater company. By incorporating in a reconstituted format all the ingredients of a theatrical production—sets, props, lighting, sound, even costumes—Kanouk and Wilson underscore the pivotal part architecture plays in the performance of human identity. The migrants' home life, as well as their dreams for the future and ties to the past, is invested in makeshift environments, understood as the sum total of walls, furniture, and equipment that together constitute domestic space.

But unlike most architects, and for that matter most stage designers, Kanouk and Wilson refuse to distinguish between the architectural shell and the ostensibly secondary artifacts they shelter. Compressing all of these normally separate elements within foldable panels, Kanouk and Wilson make visible the fluid and interdependent relationship between clothing, furniture, and architecture. They treat materials, both hard and soft, opaque and translucent, as surfaces. Wooden panels, composed of striated layers of plywood, resemble the thin samples of linoleum tile, carpet and silk that they frame. If, to varying degrees, we all lead increasingly nomadic lives, then in the process of representing the unique spatial predicament of migrants, (a)way station highlights a more general architectural condition. The architectural finishes that clothe the walls of architecture behave like the garments that adorn our bodies—they are malleable surfaces with which each of us, migrant and resident alike, fashion identity.

Joel Sanders



A recently published report by the United Nations High Commissioner states that 45 million migrants, refugees, and expelled—victims of poverty, famine, epidemics, natural catastrophes, unemployment, civil wars, and persecutions—are in the midst of flight to new homes. The number is expected to increase sharply in the immediate future, the destination of such migration is very often the metropolis. Generally, migrants consider their new home to be temporary—a non-place. Our query into this subject matter posits that this conception of transience results from living in a domestic space that exists between a previous home and an imagined place—a utopia—to which people aspire. What, therefore, are the social and psychological ramifications of creating a new home in an urban context that exists short of their utopian imaginings?

In modern architecture's polemical utopian projects the immense and complex scale of the urban plan often subsumed the smaller scale of the domicile. Architects conceptualized the construction of the places of everyday life either as cells within a monolithic housing block or as units within a vast carpet of low rise dwellings. In Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse or Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, to consider two prominent examples, life within the well-equipped house was organically linked to the functioning of the entire urban milieu. These urban proposals emphasized movement systems that incorporated the latest technology in rapid transportation: automobiles and airplanes. Such infrastructural movement systems were, however, always the means for increasing circulation within already homogeneous social groups.

But what can be made of the modernist obsession for travel in light of the reality that the de facto modern subject was and is, not the self-directed, mobile cultural agent these architects and others imagined, but a migrant who moves, often compelled by unpredictable economic, political, and social upheavals, to new places? The migrant, instead of arriving at a gleaming vast architectural utopia, arrives at a contingent and intimate domestic space. Here, in this site of domesticity, this way-station, the migrant assembles a new home out of material possessions—transported objects of sentimental value and newly acquired objects of consumer culture—imbued with both memories of the place of origin and aspirations of imagined spaces. Within this space, personal psychic desire coalesces with the space of the social, the public, and the ideological; here, the subject responds to the forces of new traditions, new values, new nationalisms, and the attendant new emotional and perceptual relations to urban space.

This traveling installation is attended by a forthcoming book, *The Narrative of Domestic Space and Urban Migration* (projected publication: fall 2000), which is in part a documentation of (a)way station's journey. The book includes essays that examine issues bearing upon the temporary homes associated with migration; these domestic sites serve as the lens through which urban space is reinterpreted. The book's essays are provided by artists, architects, and scholars in the fields of architecture, art, urban studies, cultural studies, and social theory. Contributors to *The Narrative of Domestic Space and Urban Migration* include Judith Barry, Caren Kaplan, Ulrich Desert, Rosalyn Deutsche, Sharon Haas, Leslie Lokko, Christopher Reed, Joel Sanders, Gregory L. Ulmer, and Anthony Vidler.

Paul Kanouk & Mabel Q. Wilson

